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Photo by David Crozier

There are more than \$10 billion worth of construction projects occurring at U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys in Pyongtaek, Korea, in support of the new command sponsorship program. Above, CW3 William Nager, wife Bren, sons Dane (upside down), Caden, Collin and baby Riley at the entrance to their home in the new family housing complex. Opposite page – this statue is located outside of Tunnel 3, a North Korean infiltration tunnel located on the demilitarized zone that was discovered in October 1978, is the re-Unification monument and represents the hope many people have of re-uniting Korea. North Korea is on one side of the sphere, South Korea's on the other.

# Welcome to KOREA

By David Crozier



For the last 50 plus years getting an assignment to Korea was viewed by many to be more like a sentencing than a change of duty station. It was a place the Army stuck you for a year and unless you were in a critical command position you weren't authorized to bring your family. And even if you did you couldn't ship your household goods.

In the early days following the Korean War, South Korea was in shambles, a poor country fighting to keep its independence in an uncertain world while also trying to find its niche. Fast forward to 2008 and South Korea has the 11th largest economy in the world and is considered the most technologically connected country in the world.

With the exception of numerous memorials, gone are the remnants of a war that nearly plummeted the country into communist rule. Instead what blossomed is a country of diversity, culture and yes, western influence to the likes of Starbucks, Office Depot, McDonalds, Outback Steakhouse – the list goes on. Korea is now considered an “Assignment of Choice,” said officials at Eighth U.S. Army (8th Army) especially so for those young noncommissioned officers who are seeking command sponsored tours.

“There was a time when serving in Korea was ‘life be hard.’ It was hard being stationed here and access to services and so forth was problematic,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Barry Wheeler, 8th Army command sergeant major now retired. “You did not have all the comforts of home and Korea was kind of a backwards country, mostly agricultural and not very well developed. Those days are gone.”

Wheeler, who had his first tour in Korea in 1975 and then came back in 2000 to serve as the command sergeant major of 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division before returning again in 2005 as the command sergeant major of 8<sup>th</sup> Army, said there is nothing backwards about serving in Korea anymore. The only thing that makes Korea a hardship tour is not bringing your family.

“The Army needs Korea to be an island of stability. There is enough instability in the Army without having to treat Korea as a hardship tour,” he said. “We want Korea to be a normal tour just like Germany or any other location that is overseas.”

In October 2007 U.S Forces Korea doubled the command sponsorship program from a little more than

2,900 slots to just shy of 6,000 slots per order of General B.B. Bell, the Combatant Command commander.

The job of filling those slots for the Army falls on the shoulders of Sgt. Maj. Stanley Ashford, 8<sup>th</sup> Army G-1 sergeant major.

“As many know, Korea used to be the worst assignment in the United States Army many years ago. Since then we have kind of evolved into an assignment of choice for several reasons – we have instituted the Assignment Incentive Program which



allows you to have repetitive assignments here,” Ashford said. “The AIP actually pays Soldiers an additional \$300 to \$400 depending on whether they want to extend for two or three years. From a command standpoint that is good because it stabilizes the force.”

With many Soldiers preparing for their second and third deployments to Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom the ability to stay put in one area for a couple of years is something Ashford said should be a plus for Soldiers considering Korea as an assignment of choice.

“I don’t think we are going to have a problem filling these billets because if you go back to Germany or somewhere in the states, the odds are you are going to end up back in the rotation and you are going to spend 15 months in the desert,” he said. “So we can offer you 24 months here in Korea with your family and kids. We have great schools, Korea is one of the fastest growing economies, it is state of the art with modern technology, we have all the sports programs and we enjoy a great relationship with the Korean government and community.”

Ashford noted that the increase in command sponsored billets is not just in the senior officer/NCO ranks. He said when 8<sup>th</sup> Army began looking at increasing the slots; it looked across the board at all ranks. On the enlisted side there will be approximately 600 slots to be filled. Household goods shipments are limited currently to one fourth the normal joint travel regulation allowance. If you extend for an additional year in Korea your JTR will increase for your permanent change of station move out of Korea. Soldiers authorized command sponsorship will get full cost of living allowance and overseas housing allowance. Because much of the comforts of home are provided by 8<sup>th</sup> Army, assignment instructions inform incoming Soldiers what to bring and what not to bring, particularly on furniture and large household items.

The bottom line, said Ashford, is accepting an assignment to Korea is not the 12-month sentence of old.

“Korea has changed. It has evolved into a nice place to be. It has a good mission, you can go out on the town and enjoy yourself as in any other tour,” he said. “You receive all the entitlements that you receive anywhere else. Korea is one of the safest places to be and the schools are top notch. All Department of Defense Dependents Schools are rated very high. With or without



U.S. Army photo by Edward Johnson, IMCOM-K Public Affairs

USAG Humphreys is leading the way in providing modern housing units for Soldiers and families stationed in Korea. The \$8.3 billion expansion and construction effort will increase its capacity from 9,000 soldiers, civilians and family members to more than 45,000.

your family, your ability to remain in Korea for more than one year should be enticing for anyone.”

With the increase in command sponsored billets also comes the increase in family members and a need to increase the availability of housing, schools, amenities and infrastructure. Current plans for US Forces Korea are to consolidate 104 camps and stations into two enduring hubs with a joint training area. One of those hubs is U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys located in Pyongtaek and site of more than \$8 billion in construction projects.

“This is going to be a premiere installation,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Jason Kim, USAG Humphreys and Area III command sergeant major. “The Humphreys Master Plan shows that currently we have 9,000 people here including Soldiers, civilians and family members. We are going to grow to about 45,000 people.”

To accommodate that increase, and with support of the South Korean government, USAG Humphreys is expanding its footprint from 1,210 acres to 3,538 acres; is building 630 new facilities that includes 2,848 housing units, senior leader quarters, three elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, several new barracks, training areas, an 18-hole golf course, and all of the amenities found on any stateside post – commissary, food courts, recreational facilities, child care center and more.

When completed USAG Humphreys will be home to Headquarters United Nations Command, US Forces Korea, Naval Forces Korea, Marine Forces Korea, Special Operations Command, Eighth U.S. Army and numerous other tenant units.

“When all is said and done the population of USAG Humphreys will be equal to a Fort Hood or Fort Bragg,” Kim said. “Theirs is horizontal, ours is vertical.”

For Soldiers and families alike the major improvements at

USAG Humphreys that gets their attention the most are the accommodations.

“I love them compared to what we used to live in. Those were some bad barracks,” said Pfc. Martha Graham who now lives in the new 8-story, 232-room barracks. “We have good common areas, no mold, and I can breathe. In the old barracks the showers were a surprise in that it could go from cold to scolding hot to cold, but here everything is good.”

“I actually like it a lot. We have elevators, the rooms are nice and cozy and everything works here,” said Spc. Mihn Mack. “I was over at building 759 and those barracks were very horrible – it was bad – there was mold everywhere. Here it is nice; there is a kitchen on every floor as well as washers and dryers.”

The unaccompanied senior leader accommodations for sergeant first class and above and officers are more like a nice hotel, said acting housing director Lance Guyton.

“Each room is set up the same with the enlisted quarters being about 20-feet smaller than the officer side, but I am sure it is very gratifying for the Soldiers because this is very much like home,” he said. “It [currently] is a hardship tour and when they come here they have all this nice furniture, nice living space, they can cook, have a washer and dryer, walk in bathroom – so everything is right here.”

On the accompanied family side of accommodations, the dual-military Ficks family said, it is very nice.

“It is a good set up. They have got the playgrounds all around and the school is within walking distance,” said Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Chris Fick of his 1,700 square foot 3-bedroom accommodations in the 7-story, 42-family tower complex. “You have got a kitchen in the middle, dual entrances, the bedrooms are set up towards the back and it has a great living room and open areas. It’s great.”

Before Fick and his family moved to Korea they were stationed at Fort Sill, Okla., and owned a home in the Lawton, Okla., area. He said that he never thought coming to Korea would be that good.

“We have lived in family housing before but not in a tower situation,” she said. “The insulation is very good; we don’t hear anybody around here, not even the elevator running. So it is still very private, you just don’t have a big yard.”

His wife Staff Sgt. Pamela Fick agreed.

“It is nice. They have definitely furnished it well,” she said. “I have lived in apartments before and this is much nicer.”

As for living in Korea as a family, the Ficks said there are both good and bad things, much like any overseas assignment.

“Bringing your family here is a good

thing. My workload is a little much for the family to go out a lot, but when the ops tempo goes down, you can go out to Seoul, take the kids to Seoul land or Lotte World [theme parks].”

“The only drawback is being away from family back home for so long,” said Chris. “But we use the Vonage phone line to call home and the mini cam on the computer to stay in touch.”

Still the Ficks enjoy having everything within walking distance – the shopette, the child development center, youth services, playgrounds and the school – a real plus for those without vehicles.

While USAG Humphreys is building up to meet its increasing role as a main hub, USAG Yongsan, current home of Eighth U.S. Army, is doing all it can to improve life there until it moves to USAG Humphreys some years down the road. For USAG Yongsan, that improvement is being honchoed by Command Sgt. Maj. Charles Smith, U.S. Eighth Army Troop Command.

“We have about 3,000 Soldiers, with or without dependents that we are responsible for here in Yongsan. Headquarters and Headquarters Company has a total of about 1,700 Soldiers themselves. So I have the largest battalion in the Army and the first sergeant has the largest company in the Army,” Smith said. “We have a total of 15 barracks with a maximum capacity of 720 Soldiers and all of them have been [recently] renovated.”

Smith said the next step to improving living conditions is to renovate the bachelor enlisted and officer quarters. The whole in-

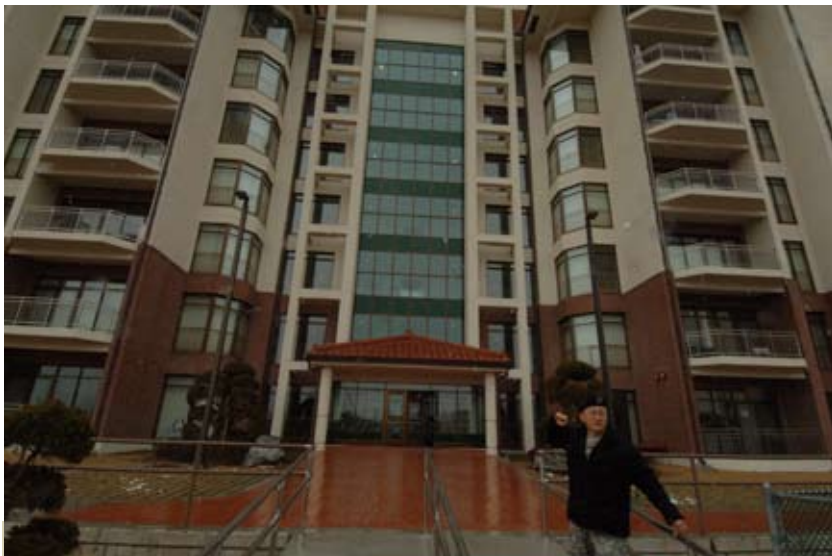


Photo by Stacy A. Ouellette, USAG-H Public Affairs

Above - USAG Humphreys recently opened the Splish and Splash, the Army’s premier aquatics park. The park is a first of its kind in the Pacific and features a 50-meter swimming pool, water slides, a children’s play area, a full service snack bar, volleyball courts, and an amphitheater for outdoor concerts. Right - USAG Humphreys also recently opened a new Child Development Center with a capacity of 303 children. It features media, music and play areas both inside and out.



Photo by Bob McElroy, USAG-H Public Affairs



tent he said is to hopefully entice more Soldiers to come to Korea, particularly Soldiers in the mid-level ranks.

“We have a lot of junior Soldiers, but we don’t have the right rank structure in the right [jobs] and the reason why is because of the old stigma about Korea – you go away for 12 months; away from your family,” he said. “Our job is to paint the picture that Korea is not a bad place for families and if you want to come to Korea and stay for two years or up to five years, you can.”

In the barracks area, 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. Stacy Evans, HHC, said the renovations involved replacing all of the windows, sandblasting and sealing of all interior walls and replacing all the doors and respective hardware.

“The rooms also have all new furniture, mattresses, wall lockers, microwaves, new tile and more,” he said.

“We used to have major complaints before the barracks renovation,” Smith said. “When I did my first walkthrough the Soldiers were complaining about paint coming off the walls, Soldiers living in substandard barracks – nobody was taking care of things and no one was involved. That has all changed. The Army has placed so much more emphasis on quality of life for the Soldiers that it is a major difference from before.

“This is not the Korea I remember when I served in 1986. We didn’t have nice barracks. I was here for 12 months and you were just here, go to the field, go downtown, partying and that was it. That was all you had to look forward to. Today, Korea is a lovely place to be.”

From the new family housing towers and barracks at USAG Humphreys (left and below) to the ongoing renovation efforts at USAG Yongsan (below left), the quality of life for Soldiers and families is at the forefront of the US Forces Korea transformation to becoming an “Assignment of Choice.” Opposite page, Korea is a land of diversity and culture and at the heart of it is the capital city Seoul. The city boasts a population of more than 10 million people, blending the past with the present in a safe and inviting atmosphere.

Photos by David Crozier



Wheeler said that while he would have loved to see the transformation of Korea come to its full potential, the idea of a 12-month tour is no longer a practical one and it’s an unsafe decision.

“The 12-month tour is a safety hazard. The most dangerous things we do at any installation is in a military vehicle or privately owned vehicle and by the time you get someone trained up on how to drive the roads here in Korea it’s almost time for them to depart,” he said. “A 12-month tour here in Korea is not like you are patrolling the streets of Baghdad every day. It is not necessary and our Army pretty much agrees.”

Wheeler said that if a Soldier agrees to come to Korea and not listen to all of the hearsay about it being a bad assignment, they will like what they see.

“I have witnessed it firsthand as a brigade command sergeant major. There was not a day that [went] by that I didn’t have a packet hit my desk requesting either a deferment or a deletion from an assignment to Korea. It was the number one pain in my posterior. But I brought the brigade over here for Bold Eagle in 1999 and when we got back from that I never saw another request to get out of Korea,” he said. “Once they got here, they saw, and they understood. This isn’t the backwards country with Quonset huts of the 1950s. Those days are gone.”

For more information about assignment possibilities to Korea contact your branch manager and visit the Eighth U.S. Army Web site at <http://8tharmy.korea.army.mil/>. 📌

